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Drawing the Frontlines: Daily Life of Soviet Artist-Combatants through their WWII Visual and Written Narratives

Throughout the Second World War, the Soviet state flooded its soldiers on the front with visual materials to shape their attitudes toward the ongoing events. These official images offered a continuous background to the soldiers' visual environment. Sometimes following and at other times rejecting the guidance of the state, frontline men also produced their own war images on paper in their free time. While professional artists were sent to the front to make visual records of battles, heroes, scenes of everyday life on the frontlines, and traces of destruction in the "liberated" cities, amateur artist-combatants also fought with "pencils and brushes," making caricatures of the enemy. These images are useful historical sources because they provide access to the mental universe (or mental construct) of the Soviet soldiers on the frontlines.

Using a close analysis of images, my dissertation, entitled "Imaging the War: Visual Representations on the Soviet-German Front, 1941-45," compares drawings created by on-duty Soviet soldiers in the Red Army with state-sponsored visual sources, such as photographs and caricatures in illustrated newspapers. Approaching my source base chronologically, I contrast visual materials and written personal sources to assess the ways of thinking of war artists, both professionals and amateurs, while evaluating to what extent their perceptions were influenced by the state's visual propaganda. My work investigates the evolving wartime functions of those artist-combatants' drawings. How did the purpose of those drawings change over time, adapting to the radical changes of the artists' everyday conditions? How can an analysis of these images help us to better understand the experiences of Soviet soldiers during WWII? My dissertation shows that, for artist-combatants, drawing became a way to both engage with and escape from the unfolding events, define their own identity, and record the people and places they encountered during their military travels. My work first discusses artists' initial contact with frontline life in 1941-42, and the role they played in the creation of state propaganda in the first months following the outbreak of the war. The second chapter analyzes soldiers' amateur caricatures submitted to the satirical magazine *Krokodil*, highlighting how artists and editors debated the ways the enemy should

be visually depicted. Looking at sketches soldiers made during their free time or while recovering in hospital in 1942-45, my dissertation also studies the composition of frontline sketchbooks and their role as material objects, or tools for practicing art and recording reflections. The fourth chapter shows how artist-combatants made drawings to visually record their path to Berlin, beginning in 1943. It demonstrates how the soldiers' impulse to put "foreign" landscapes on paper mutated into an urge to record the war destruction and document Nazi crimes. The last chapter shows that, while by 1943 depictions of prisoners started to be used to symbolize the vanquished Wehrmacht, portraits of heroes were largely circulated as the embodiment of the Red Army's victories.

My PhD project builds on recent developments in the field of Soviet history. The Red Army has been at the center of studies discussing the impact of propaganda on soldiers' political allegiance and motivations to fight. (Weiner, 2000; Merridale, 2006; Reese, 2011) Looking at Soviet soldiers' contributions to the collective with their art, my work intersects with the concept of Soviet subjectivity, which examines the extent to which Soviet citizens absorbed and believed in Communist ideology during the Stalinist period. (Kotkin, 1995; Halfin & Hellbeck, 1996; Hellbeck, 2006 & 2015; Peri, 2017). Based on archival research conducted in eighteen different archives, libraries and museums throughout Russia, Ukraine, Germany and the United States, my dissertation consists of the first extensive attempt to write a comprehensive history of Red Army soldiers' everyday life and wartime attitudes through an analysis of visual materials. My research stands at the crossroads of histories of visual art, culture and propaganda, everyday life, violence, and memory, contributing to interdisciplinary conversations about wartime art and Eastern European culture.